

## Texts, Themes and Theologies

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# **Texts, Themes and Theologies: A Response to John Goldingay's *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah***

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One of the great challenges that any biblical scholar with any sort of ongoing religious commitment faces is how to read the Bible honestly, freely and openly in both its academic and ecclesial contexts. This is by no means a straightforward task, combining as it does the need for rigorous scholarship, engagement with real-world issues and sensitivity to and appreciation of religious needs and sensitivities, and effective, clear communication which is neither highfalutin nor patronising. Many can engage with one of these communities or the other, but few with both. It was therefore a great personal delight to discover that Professor Goldingay's *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah* is such a vivid, engaging, clear, accessible and comprehensible scholarly account of Isaiah's thought which will be helpful to a somewhat more popular audience without ever falling into the trap of being uncritical, ill-informed overly simplistic or lacking in nuance. The important contribution this book makes does not arise from any radical reinterpretation or new analysis of the biblical text that it offers. In fact, Goldingay consciously shuns overly-sophisticated exegesis here and refers his readers back instead to the commentaries that inform and underpin his conclusions. The tone of this particular volume is one of gentle, informed assertion more than detailed argument, though there is little to contest here, and in some ways, nothing radically new – the strength of the work is in its coherent presentation rather than its interpretative innovation.

Goldingay's representation of Isaiah will neither alienate scholars nor befuddle a more popular audience. He gives us a Vision of Isaiah read not only canonically but as part of the heritage of the Christian church, sometimes understood in the light of more fundamentally Christian concepts of messiahship and of soteriology, sometimes explained by reference to New Testament ideas and episodes (such as the allusion to Saul of Tarsus on p. 118). But this identification of common ground affords a useful opportunity for the church to better grasp and assimilate a critically-informed appreciation of Isaiah's message (or at least of some of the book's many messages) and

for scholars to be reminded of the need for what Goldingay labels 'a theology that can be lived with' (p. 149).

In considering the book's value and importance, it occurs to me that it might be appropriate to adopt (albeit in a somewhat contorted measure) Goldingay's own helpful dichotomy between meaning and significance, between the issues and ideas a text is generated to express and address, and the implications, resonances and reflections it generates with those who engage with it. So I'll use the same framework here and think briefly, first, about the many things about the book which I found to have particular meaning and importance, aspects of John's considerable achievement in this short volume which I particularly appreciate and enjoy in their own right. Permit me to highlight just two of these, since I'm sure many of my colleagues will pick up on others.

First, I particularly appreciated the appreciation, built into the very design of the book, that there is a huge difference (conceptually at least) between the theologies *in* the book and a variety of theologies which might be seen as *arising from* the book. Clearly it is possible to imagine and construct a biblical theology in many different ways, and I hugely appreciate the attention to detail with which Goldingay approaches this issue. Actually I might have been inclined myself to have pushed the idea a little further still. Goldingay seems to want to uphold the coherence of the various elements of the collage he offers; it would have been an interesting experiment to have adopted an even more atomistic view and look at the books individual assertions in their own right and in detail before accounting for context, which would read tensions and – heaven forbid – even contradictions into the text and create the opportunity for new insight into the precise nuancing of Isaiah's theology. However, that possibility is probably excluded by the need to keep the book a manageable and sustainable length.

Second, and related, I appreciated Goldingay's explicit acknowledgement of the possibility that texts have multiple significances, and the influence of the context of the reader in shaping that meaning.<sup>1</sup> Goldingay begins his analysis in Part One with a

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<sup>1</sup> Discussion of this issue on p. 35; Cf. p. 69 - servant songs discussion - and perhaps p. 72 fn?

recognition that Isaiah represents a ‘collage’, or indeed multiple collages (p. 12) of texts, and he uses this analogy to good effect in this first section of the book where the predominant themes of the individual collages are highlighted. Again, in a book of limitless length, perhaps this collage analogy could have been pushed further and deeper, and in particular, I would have been very interested in seeing how and why John feels the various component collages might be connected (and, perhaps, how we might join them up where they aren’t). In other words, in an ideal world a more explicitly intertextual discussion would have been fascinating, and would open up further reflection and meaning-making, which might include opportunities for ethical critique<sup>2</sup> and a greater emphasis on the depth and complexity of Isaiah’s ideas – particularly with regard to his hugely-multifaceted portrayal of YHWH.

Having discussed the book’s meaning briefly, then, let me turn to its significance and its impact upon me as a reader. Another great strength of the book for me personally is in the questions it provokes and draws out as I engage with it. There are many of these, but for starters:

1. How do we use the Bible for theological reflection or formulation? This is probably a question asked by theologians more than by biblical scholars, but that’s all the more reason for me to ask it here. It seems to me that the directionality is important. Do we read the text forward and allow it to develop into a series of theological affirmations (and denials), or do we start with theological positions that we want to better understand, contextualise historically or defend? How do we allow nuance and resist over-systematisation (or at least defer the homogenisation of theology so it doesn’t appear too soon and compromise our appreciation of the tone and shade of Isaiah’s argument)? Then, how do we incorporate Isaiah’s ideas into a comprehensive theology? Do we need to buy what this Vision is selling us? Is it acceptable for us to reject some of the truth-claims of this or any other canonical book, or is there a role for faithful resistance to the text? Are there some parts of Isaiah’s message that have – at least frequently – not been picked up by faith

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. the destroy and rebuild discussion, pp. 57-58.

communities and used as theological building bricks because they are just a bit too problematic or complex (perhaps some of his political theology, for example?)? And, the key question for any person of faith: how do we roll Isaiah's ideas forward into contemporary faithful living?

2. Why should we worry about the historical context to any great measure? This isn't a new question and it won't surprise those who know me to hear me asking it. But Goldingay's attention to the difference between meaning and significance confirms my bias here, which depends upon the assumption that any historical reconstruction is by definition hypothetical, and that even when it is a highly probable, maybe even an almost certain reconstruction, it can never be finally confirmed. There's enough of the empiricist in me to make me think that we should always prioritise the contemporary context of the reader over the anticipated ancient context of the author, but enough of the phenomenologist to make me want to permit a text to have a meaning and the power to shape its interpreters, let alone their interpretations. But prioritising my context prompts a related series of questions. What's the direction of travel here – is it what I bring to the text that shapes meaning, or what the text brings to me? What is the connection between structure and meaning in a text? Where is the determinative power? How do texts, in Kathryn Darr's delightful phrase, 'persuade readers to particular perceptions of reality'? When engaging with a book of the scale of the Vision of Isaiah, then what difference might a synchronic as opposed to a diachronic reading of the text make (and does this distinction map onto Goldingay's Pt 1 vs Pt 2)?
3. Those somewhat more abstract questions find specific shape for me in this context in a series of questions which relate very directly back to Goldingay's work here. The obvious one is perhaps, how should we read Isaiah? But I wonder if 'How *might* we read Isaiah?' is a better way to invite a fuller and more rounded reflection on the various treasures that nuanced engagement with the details of the text uncovers. And where we start looking determines, to a large extent, what we discover. So, for example, I loved the way John uses the Song of the Vineyard, Isa. 5:1-7, as the central core of his first collage rather than just starting at the very beginning (which

may be a very good place to start, but certainly isn't the only way in). Visitors to the front door of any house will gain a different first impression from those who break in through the bathroom window. So I'm interested in thinking about how the doorways that we adopt into texts serve to direct and shape the meanings we encounter. Using 5:1-7 as a way in shapes our experience of Isaiah's message in a different direction when compared, for instance, to the swords into ploughshares pericope of 2:2-5.

4. Finally, in that regard, Goldingay's book itself serves as an excellent doorway and will shape the experience of many future readers of Isaiah as it has those of us interacting with the book today. If I could be so bold as to ask John a somewhat personal question, though, I'd be interested to know how the doorway of the process of writing this volume served to remodel his own understanding of Isaiah, though, so can I close by asking him how his perceptions of the message of the book as a whole have developed as he has written them down for us.